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MIAMI HERALD
24 October 1980

TV report: Air Force financed bribery for Vietnam spy efforts

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The U.S. Air Force hired Lockheed Aircraft Corp. to bribe foreign government officials during the Vietnam War so they would allow American military aircraft to launch spy missions from their countries into China, North Vietnam and North Korea, CBS News reported Sunday night.



In the weekly news magazine "60 Minutes," the network said the top-secret contract was carried out with money kept in secret Swiss bank accounts managed jointly by high-level Air Force officers and Lockheed executives.

CBS said it obtained the contract from unidentified government sources.

Government officials active in the intelligence community during the 1970s expressed shock at the arrangement. The former chief of Air Force intelligence said he was "aghast" to learn of the contract. He said it must have been run by the CIA.

The contract came to light because an Air Force officer who handled the money in the mid-1970s, retired Maj. Gen. Richard B. Collins of Fort Lauderdale, was indicted this year and charged with embezzling about \$450,000 from the accounts.

Collins was a top aide to former Secretary of State Alexander Haig, then supreme commander of NATO and U.S. forces in Europe. Collins performed the most sensitive long-range war planning, managed the spy money and conducted bilateral military negotiations with American allies.

In court documents filed earlier this year, the government said Collins may have earned \$19,000 to \$400,000 in the scheme by investing the money for his own purposes and keeping the interest before returning the original sum to the U.S. Treasury.

Since his indictment, Collins has threatened to disclose top-secret information about the purpose of the accounts as part of his defense.

U.S. Justice Department prosecutors have appealed U.S. District Judge James C. Paine's decision to allow the information as evidence when the trial begins in his West Palm Beach court. A hearing before the 11th Circuit Court of Appeals in Atlanta is scheduled Nov. 3.

"We're going to do whatever we can to defend him," Stephen Bronis, Collins' attorney, said after the broadcast. "If they're going to play hardball, we will, too."

The contract disclosed Sunday night presumably is a part of what Collins planned to reveal in trial.

The contract's bribery arrangements were needed to facilitate the use of foreign landing fields by American C130 transport planes, CBS reported. The April 1965 agreement said Lockheed would be "reimbursed by the government for bribes to foreign officials incident to the aircraft airworthiness inspection and registration."

The network did not name the countries that were to receive the

bribes. It said the only records on payments made to foreign officials might have been destroyed by Collins.

"I did not destroy any records," Collins said Sunday night after the broadcast. "If those records were destroyed, somebody else did it."

Lockheed insisted the word "bribes" be written into the contract to protect the giant defense contractor should questions arise later about the arrangement, CBS said.

The spying program was code-named Operation Buttercup and based at Norton Air Force Base in California until it ended in 1972, the network said. Two C130 aircraft were used in Buttercup to perform surveillance flyovers of North Vietnam, North Korea and the People's Republic of China.

U.S. Rep. Albert Gore (D., Tenn.), who has been briefed on the case by intelligence officials, said the aircraft dropped spies into North Vietnam "a number of times."